

Rebirth

The Continuity of Mind

From the Buddhist point of view, the main argument that “establishes” rebirth is one based on a profound understanding of the continuity of mind. Where does consciousness come from? It cannot arise out of nowhere. A moment of consciousness cannot be produced without the moment of consciousness that immediately preceded it . . .

Most people take the word “reincarnation” to imply there is some “thing” that reincarnates, which travels from life to life. But in Buddhism we do not believe in an independent and unchanging entity like a soul or ego that survives the death of the body. What provides the continuity between lives is not an entity, we believe, but the ultimately subtlest level of consciousness. The Dalai Lama explains:

According to the Buddhist explanation, the ultimate creative principle is consciousness. There are different levels of consciousness. What we call innermost subtle consciousness is always there. The continuity of that consciousness is almost like something permanent, like the space-particles. In the field of matter, that is the space-particles; in the field of consciousness, it is the Clear Light ... The Clear Light, with its special energy, makes the connection with consciousness (*Dialogues with Scientists and Sages: The Search of Unity*, 237).

The exact way in which rebirth takes place has been well illustrated with the following example:

The successive existences in a series of rebirths are not like the pearls in a pearl necklace, held together by a string, the “soul,” which passes through all the pearls; rather they are like dice piled one on top of the other. Each die is separate, but it supports the one above it, with which it is functionally connected. Between the dice there is no identity, but conditionality (Schumann, H. W. *The Historical Buddha*, 139)

There is in the Buddhist scriptures a very clear account of this process of conditionality. The Buddhist sage Nagasena explained it to King Milinda in a set of famous answers to questions that the King posed him.

The King asked Nagasena: "When someone is reborn, is he the same as the one who just died, or is he different?"

Nagasena replied: "He is neither the same, nor different . . . Tell me, if a man were to light a lamp, could it provide light the whole night long?"

"Yes."

"Is the flame then which burns in the first watch of the night the same as the one that burns in the second . . . or the last?"

"No."

"Does that mean there is one lamp in the first watch of the night, another in the second, and another in the third?"

"No, it's because of that one lamp that the light shines all night."

"Rebirth is much the same: one phenomenon arises and another stops, simultaneously. So the first act of consciousness in the new existence is neither the same as the last act of consciousness in the previous existence, nor is it different."

The King asks for another example to explain the precise nature of this dependence, and Nagasena compares it to milk: the curds, butter, or *ghee* that can be made from milk are never the same as the milk, but they depend on it entirely for their production.

The King then asks: "If there is no being that passes on from body to body, wouldn't we then be free of all the negative actions we had done in past lives?"

Nagasena gives this example: A man steals someone's mangoes. The mangoes he steals are not exactly the same mangoes that the other person had originally owned and planted, so how can he possibly deserve to be punished? The reason he does, Nagasena explains, is that the stolen mangoes only grew because of those that their owner had planted in the first place. In the same way, it is because of our actions in one life, pure or impure, that we are linked with another life, and we are not free from their results.

Source: Rinpoche, Sogyal (2002). *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. Edited by Patrick Gaffney and Andrew Harvey. New York: HarperCollins Publishers. (Pages 93-96.)